

News Release

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

USFWS and FDOT Partnering In Effort to Decrease Florida Panther, Vehicle Collisions

FDOT has built six wildlife crossings with associated fencing on SR 29 and 67 in other areas to benefit the panther and other wildlife

VERO BEACH, Fla. – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) are working to prevent collisions between Florida panthers and vehicles on State Road 80 in Hendry County, Fla.

As part of a project to widen State Road 80, FDOT has built about 8,600 feet of fencing on both sides of the road and added an underpass at the Service's request. This underpass includes two eight-foot-wide shelves, one on each side, with greater than six feet of vertical clearance.

The shelves allow panthers and other wildlife to cross safely under the roadway. The fencing funnels panthers and other wildlife to the underpass. The Service and FDOT are seeking approval from neighboring land owners to install additional fencing along SR 80.

"Preventing these collisions is good for both public safety and panther conservation," said Larry Williams, the Service's Florida State Supervisor for Ecological Services.

He added, "FDOT is to be commended for acting on this proactive conservation opportunity. Vehicle collisions on one of the busiest roads in 'Florida panther country' will likely come down, while at the same time, the safe movement of this endangered species will be enabled."

Collisions with vehicles are the number one cause of deaths for Florida panthers. As of March 9, eight Florida panthers have been struck and killed by vehicles. In calendar year 2014, a record 25 Florida panthers were killed that way.

To date, FDOT has built six wildlife crossings with associated fencing on State Road 29 and 67 in other areas to benefit the panther and other wildlife.

"We're pleased to have partnered with the Service during the State Road 80 project and cooperatively developed other features we could add to the bridges over the C-1 canal," said FDOT District Secretary Billy Hattaway. "Channeling wildlife under the roadway is working in other corridors, and this approach fit well with our project in Hendry County."

Nancy Payton, Florida Wildlife Federation Southwest Florida Field Representative, said, "We applaud the cooperative efforts among FDOT, the Service and private landowners to reduce Florida panther road deaths and to enhance Florida's conservation network by installing highway fencing and underpasses in strategic locations."

She added, "As the breeding population expands into Central Florida and beyond, these partnerships will be fundamental to the Florida panther's recovery."

The location of the State Road 80 project is of particular significance because in 2012 a trail camera photographed a female Florida panther and her two kittens just south of the road--the farthest north a female has been documented since 1980. This suggests that females are getting closer to moving north of the

Caloosahatchee River for the first time in decades. In addition, in late February male panther tracks were found at the new underpass.

"In order for panthers to recover, they need to expand their range outside of Southwest Florida," said Williams. "Projects like this lend a helping hand to panther recovery by connecting suitable habitat via corridors. This allows for safe and natural dispersal of panthers northward."

Another wildlife crossing is proposed for the State Road 80 four-lane project coming in Hendry County. Construction on this roadway segment (which includes the crossing at the C-2 canal) probably won't start until sometime in 2017.

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